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# **“THE PEOPLE OF THIS COUNTRY HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF EXPERTS”: IN DEFENCE OF THE “ELITES” OF THE SCIENCE-AND-RELIGION DEBATE**

## **Abstract**

This article takes a critical stance on John H. Evans’ 2018 book, *Morals Not Knowledge: Recasting the Contemporary US Conflict Between Religion and Science*. Highlighting the significance of the book for the science-and-religion debate, particularly the book’s emphasis on *moral* questions over *knowledge* claims revealed in social-scientific studies of the American public, I also suggest that the distinction between the “elites” of the academic science-and-religion field, and the religious “public” is insufficiently drawn. I argue that various nuances should be taken into account concerning the portrayal of “elites”, nuances which potentially change the way that “conflict” between science and religion is envisaged, as well as the function of the field. Similarly, I examine the ways in which the book construes science and religion as distinct knowledge systems, and I suggest that, from a *theological* perspective – relevant for much academic activity in science and religion – there is value in seeing science and religion in terms of a *single* knowledge system. This perspective may not address the public’s interest in moral questions directly – important as they are – but nevertheless it fulfils the academic function of advancing the frontiers of human knowledge and self-understanding.

**Keywords:** Science and religion, natural theology, sociology of religion, conflict, ethics, Christian theology

## Introduction

Readers based in the United Kingdom will immediately recognise the quotation in my title, probably with a groan, since it has become emblematic of the infamous Brexit debate of 2016 onwards.<sup>i</sup> It is not only in the UK that fears of a “conspiracy of elites” have come to prominence in recent years: populist movements across the Western world have expressed distrust of academics, economists, and other professional groupings who are perceived to speak habitually for a liberal conscience. John H. Evans’ important new book, *Morals Not Knowledge: Recasting the Contemporary US Conflict Between Religion and Science*, does not comment on the populist phenomenon, still less take a side, but in discerning clear blue water between the American public and the academics (whom Evans calls the “elites”) in the science-and-religion debate, the book makes a related point, namely that the experts have consistently misunderstood the mood of the public, and have failed to speak in the public’s interest. Knowing John personally, I imagine that he might well object to my comparison between his book and recent political controversies like the Brexit debate; nevertheless, I believe that, with his challenge to the elites of the science-and-religion world (“a provocation”; Evans 2018, 13), he has (perhaps inadvertently) hit upon a parallel that warrants further attention. This is an important book for the science-and-religion field, since it highlights the American public’s attitude to the debate, an attitude which differs in significant ways from that of the elites. There is much here to reflect upon, and I focus especially on the challenge that Evans makes to the elites, and I go on to offer a defence, arguing that nevertheless these very same elites make important contributions to human self-understanding, even if (like many academics) their concerns are not immediately those of the general public.

First, a personal reflection – a confession, if you like – relevant for seeing how I approach this book as a university academic who tries to balance twin vocations as a physicist and a theologian. Evans’ criticisms of the academic field of science and religion chimes with an uneasiness (sometimes embarrassment) that I have long felt myself, although my own uneasiness is different from that of Evans. Partly my uneasiness arises from the observation that the “science” with which the science-and-religion field engages is too often a kind of simplistic naturalism/positivism, sometimes based upon popular accounts of fundamental physics and evolutionary biology, but at any rate at some remove from the reality of professional research activity in the natural sciences. And partly it is because “religion” is often understood as a kind of cerebral Protestantism. This tendency to boil “science” and “religion” down to small areas of special interest is certainly not malicious, more due to the fact that dialogue in these areas has been particularly controverted, and contains many unresolved questions. This boiling down does come at a cost, though. First, the small areas of special interest become tacit representatives of the whole(s) of science and religion, and second, much activity in the field comes across as a thinly-veiled form of conservative-lite Christian apologetic, with little interest in other religious expressions, and still less in questions of ethics and praxis. Therefore, an opportunity is missed, I feel, to open-up one of the most important conversations facing the human race today, a conversation with far more existential, ethical, artistic and political consequences than are accommodated by the current, rather restrictive, shape of the science-and-religion field. From that point of view, Evans’ call to see the science-and-religion debate beyond the limited horizons of academics is extremely welcome, I feel.

Admittedly, my discomfort with the academic science-and-religion field has softened since I started teaching the subject in recent years; I have found ways to shape the curriculum to

reflect more accurately how I see science being done on the ground, and to represent a broader diversity of religious expression. As a result, and in spite of my uneasiness with the field, I have come to find much of value in it, which means that I also find myself leaping to the defence of its “elites” in the face of Evans’ critique, of which I myself am one (but then so is John Evans!). Of course, it is in the nature of a major publication in the field to challenge as well as to illuminate, and Evans certainly does both. By illuminating the American public’s engagement with the science-and-religion debate as concerning *moral* conflict rather than the (widely-assumed) *knowledge* conflict beloved of academics in the field, Evans throws down the gauntlet to the elites to demonstrate their own relevance. It is this relevance that I particularly hope to comment upon in this review article.

I will begin by summarising the argument of the book through its portrayal of the two key groups of stakeholders in the science-and-religion debate, the “elites” and the “public”, before moving on to chart some of the ways in which I support the book’s argument, and some of the ways in which I want to push back against the book’s portrayal of the elites.

### **The “elites” and the “public”**

It is fundamental to the book that – as far as the science-and-religion debate is concerned – there is a recognisable distinction between the ways that “elites” see the debate and the ways that the “public” – sometimes referred to as “citizens”, or “religious citizens”, but in any case the *American* public – sees it. Evans often sub-divides the “religious public” into various Christian groupings pertinent to the US context such as “literalist Conservative Protestant”,

“Mainline”, or “Black Protestant” but his basic argument is framed in terms of the elite/public binary. These two groupings are straightforwardly defined:

For my purposes, an elite is anyone who has a social role that allows them to influence the views of other people beyond their immediate acquaintances and family members *on the issue under debate*. So, obviously all academics are potentially elites, as are scientists, politicians, clergy, theologians, church officials, journalists, pundits, TV and movie producers, and leaders of social movements. The public, or citizens as I will often call them, are all of the other members of the public who lack this power.

Someone could be elite in one context but not in another (Evans 2018, 6).

In this context, an elite is a generator of ideas relevant to the science-and-religion debate, and who occupies a social role which provides a platform for them to express their ideas to the public. Whether or not those ideas influence public opinion, though, is another matter, and here the book makes a counter-intuitive but important move. Against the common tendency to lionise elites as the only people who really matter in any area of public concern (like the science-and-religion debate), Evans points out that it is the public who are the most important term in the equation. The elites may write and speak of their ideas to many people in many circles, but the elites will have no power to sway opinion or to enact change in society unless the non-elites (i.e. the public) take heed of their ideas and possess them for themselves, perhaps even to the extent of acting upon these ideas. In other words, the elites can achieve little in societal terms without support from the public. For that reason, Evans (2018, 6-7) explains that it is more important to understand what the public thinks about the science-and-religion debate than what the elites think. And crucially, he finds a difference here between the elites and the public:

It has long been claimed that one source of conflict between science and society is the religious citizens who are inevitably in conflict with science. They are so, the narrative continues, because they are opposed to scientific claims, since religion has a different way of knowing facts about the world. The common conception is that religion ultimately determines truths about the natural world through supernatural revelation and science ultimately determines truth through observation and reason. This is what I have termed systemic knowledge conflict between religion and science... The reason this systemic knowledge conflict view is common, as I argued in Chapters 2 and 3, is that most academics, and especially those who focus on the “religion and science debate”, assume it is so, and broadcast these views to the public (Evans 2018, 160).

If it has long been a widespread assumption in the modern Western world that religious believers are in fundamental conflict with science because its systemic knowledge claims are incompatible with religious claims (and vice versa), then this is because it is what the elites believe, not necessarily the members of the religious public themselves. So what does the public believe? Evans’ answer to this question occupies the heart of the book (especially Chapters 6 and 7, which present the main empirical data from social surveys), where he demonstrates that the religious public sees the conflict between science and religion primarily in *moral* terms, not as regarding knowledge. Moral concerns in bioethics, transhumanism, and the political activism of scientists are centre stage to the science-and-religion debate *for the public*, rather than the epistemological disputes about the nature of nature which so fascinate the academics. Even the creation-evolution debate, he explains, is at heart concerned with morals rather than with our knowledge of the natural world (Evans 2018, 84-85). But as Evans repeatedly points out, if we simply look at how the elites – those who are

supposed to be the opinion-makers – construe the science-and-religion debate, then we will not see the whole picture: “This is not the perspective you will get from the theologians, scientists, and historians who currently dominate the discussion of religion and science, as they see the relationship – and thus any potential conflict – as primarily about knowledge” (Evans 2018, 102). Hence, Evans’ argument is that the widespread notion of systemic knowledge conflict between science and religion must be abandoned, at least for the American public. Quite simply, the elites have misread the situation, assuming that their own guild interests are shared by all and sundry.

### **The “conflict myth”**

Evans is surely right about the public. His presentation of the empirical data charting public attitudes as focusing on moral questions in the science-and-religion debate is simply too persuasive to ignore. The elites have got it wrong when they assume that the science-and-religion debate is all about conflicting knowledge claims. But at this point my questions begin, since my own perception of the elites in the science-and-religion world is that they are generally careful *not* to construe the debate in terms of conflict, whether of knowledge or moral claims. Let me outline five nuances in the elite position which (I feel) need to be accounted for.

First, Evans’ is by no means alone in wanting to downplay the importance of systemic knowledge conflict between science and religion. In fact, most academics who work in the science-and-religion field have argued consistently and strenuously against the “conflict myth” since the field began. Peter Harrison’s recent *Territories of Science and Religion*



(2015) is a case in point which Evans himself cites (Evans 2018, 26), but there are other prominent examples, notably Ian Barbour's ground-breaking activity from the 1960s to 1990s, such as his Gifford Lectures which set out his celebrated fourfold typology (Barbour 1990), and John Hedley Brooke's *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (1991). But these seminal works would only be the tip of the iceberg of publications from the last fifty years which argue that there is more to science and religion than conflict about knowledge claims. For that matter, Evans' own book could be considered as one of the latest manifestations of this scholarly trend to discredit the "conflict myth". Is Evans guilty of inconsistency here? Is he undermining his own argument against the conflict myth by attacking his fellow "elites" who are equally motivated to discredit the myth of knowledge conflict? No, I don't think so, since Evans examines some of this work by his fellow elites, principally Ian Barbour, Alister McGrath, and John Polkinghorne (Evans 2018, 29-33). These figures may all be convinced that the notion of knowledge conflict between science and religion is, at best, only partially true, but Evans points out that their work on the relationship between science and religion still assumes that it is a "systemic knowledge relationship", not a moral one (2018, 42-43). In other words, these elites may be against conflict, but in assuming that only *knowledge* is at stake, they miss the point about the public's interest in *moral* conflict between science and religion. I partially agree with Evans here: as I mentioned above, part of my own uneasiness with the science-and-religion world stems from the fact that its construal of religion is too detached from the many and varied lived realities of religious belief, with little to no interest in ethics or praxis. Hence, I am sure that Evans is making an important point here in bringing *moral* conflict to the fore, a point which he grounds thoroughly in empirical data in this book. However, insofar as he suggests that elites ("and especially those who focus on the 'religion and science debate'"; Evans 2018, 160)

broadcast a message of *conflict* between science and religion to the public, I would disagree, since I believe that the elites are, by and large, united against the message of conflict.

Second, however, that last sentence itself needs to be nuanced further. The elites do not *deliberately* broadcast the message of conflict, but nevertheless they disseminate it nonetheless. For, in discussing the relationship between science and religion so tirelessly since at least the 1960s, these elites (including Evans, it must be added), tacitly perpetuate the notion of knowledge conflict, even if they mean to do precisely the opposite. To put it bluntly, there must be some truth to an intellectual position which refuses to resign quietly in the face of constant attacks on its hegemony by the experts. The trick for the experts should surely be, then, not to deny the reality of conflict (whether knowledge or moral, as many apologists in the science-and-religion debate do, with the common refrain that, “there is no conflict between science and religion”) but to determine under which circumstances it is true. And again we have Evans to thank for demonstrating that the notion of conflict between science and religion holds true in certain social circumstances in the United States where moral questions have come to the fore, and that these social circumstances and moral questions are more significant than the elites realise.

But third, it is important to recognise the massive difficulties that have become apparent in attempts over the last fifty years to determine the relationship between science and religion. Although Barbour’s fourfold typology of conflict, independence, dialogue and integration is often taken as the starting point, each scholar who investigates the problem seems to find their own solution(s) to the relationship. To illustrate the variety here, a by-no-means-exhaustive list of notable proposals for the relationship between science and religion could include Stephen Jay Gould’s NOMA (Non-Overlapping MAgisteria), Mikael Stenmark’s

(2010) fourfold typology of irreconcilability, reconciliation, independence, and replacement, Niels Henrik Gregersen's (2014) octopus metaphor, and Ted Peters' recent (2018) account of ten candidate models: scientism, scientific imperialism, theological authoritarianism, the evolution controversy; the two books; the two languages; ethical alliance; dialogue; naturalism; theology of nature. In fact, I suggest that Evans' own contribution in *Morals Not Knowledge* effectively adds a further possibility to the list, that of moral conflict. Overall, the diversity of potential relationships between science and religion is bewildering, illustrating something of the truth behind the "complexity" thesis which is often attributed to John Hedley Brooke, or perhaps supporting Nancey Murphy's (1996) suggestion that the exercise of determining a relationship should be seen as a form of "postmodern apologetics". If there is an element of truth to the huge diversity here, then there is presumably no single correct answer (or set of answers) to the relationship between science and religion, but nevertheless scholars will still continue to advance possible answers because of a felt need that there is *something in the air* that needs to be resolved. What is that "something"?

Here we come to my fourth nuance. Just as the endless methodological discussions in the academic science-and-religion field tacitly perpetuate the notion of conflict between science and religion without being able to hit on a realistic alternative that all can agree on, so there is a sense in which the field arose from the notion of conflict in the first place, and is dependent upon that notion for its continued existence. To see this, we need to examine the phenomenon of secularisation. Notoriously controverted and difficult to define, secularisation, like its related term secularism, seems to turn on the relativisation of traditional religious truth claims and practices (i.e. both knowledge and moral values), while (in comparison) scientific truth claims proceed unhindered. I realise that I run the risk of coming over as hopelessly naïve in discussing such matters with a sociologist, but my own understanding of the academic

science-and-religion field is that it has emerged in parallel with secularism and secularisation thought. The field relies upon, but exists to counteract, the widespread (and problematic) narrative that conflict between science and religion is inevitable in a secular culture: science will advance while religion as an alternative knowledge system will retreat until it all-but vanishes. Now Evans (2018, 67-68) himself looks at secularisation theory, and he describes recent work which indicates that secularisation does *not* rely upon systemic knowledge conflict between science and religion. This supports his thesis that the conflict should be seen in moral terms rather than knowledge. But nevertheless, there is still conflict here, insofar as religious values are seen to be under threat in modern secular society. Hence, it seems hard to escape the observation that, whether knowledge or moral values are at stake, the notion of *conflict* – and probably conflict between science and religion – is still deeply embedded in the public understanding of secularisation, which is presumably why elites continue to write articles against this notion (Brooke 2010). If so, the conflict myth acts at least partly as some kind of *social construct* to legitimate the notion that secular society is a reality in our modern world, which is why the conflict myth is so difficult to eradicate, despite the best efforts of many scholars (Evans 2018, 27). It is somewhat inevitable then, that an academic field which examines the relationship between science and religion should arise in self-consciously secular societies such as those of modern Western Europe, if not the United States too. I believe that Willem B. Drees touches on an important point when he suggests that,

‘[R]eligion and science’ in the Western world can be viewed as a response to secularization, that is, a response to the claim that science provides a better understanding of the world and a response to the expectation that the problem-solving attitude of science-based technology and medicine is to be preferred over prayer or other religious responses. If tension between religious affinities and reliance on science

provides the incentive for ‘religion and science’, contributors may look for alternatives to the view that science replaces religion. ‘Religion and science’ in this context is driven by the perception of conflict (Drees 2010, 4).

According to Drees, then, the science-and-religion field arose at least partly as a response to secularisation, as a felt need in our modern world to assert the legitimacy of religious belief in the face of scientific marginalisation, and to re-define the place of religion in society. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that so much science-and-religion activity is apologetic in form, even if it is a form of “postmodern apologetics” (Murphy 1996). But it does at least mean that the academic questions and interests cannot easily be detached from their context in secular society, insofar as they are interwoven with secularisation as a recognised feature of our modern world.

And, fifth, if I am correct in my line of argument that the conflict myth is at least partly a social construct, then it means that academic attempts to construe the relationship between science and religion in absolute terms (whether concerning questions about knowledge or morals) are missing the mark, even if they meet a felt need among elites to be doing something to address the problem of the marginalisation of religion in the secular world. A more effective response, surely, is that adopted by Evans here, as well as by others such as the research groups led by Elaine Ecklund and Fern Elsdon-Baker, all of whom take a predominantly *social-science* perspective to the science-and-religion debate, seeing it more as a complex social phenomenon than an absolute relationship between two monolithic entities. Hence, while I believe that Evans makes an important advance in our understanding of conflict between science and religion by pointing to its moral dimension in the public sphere, I question the implication of his study that we are still dealing with a relationship between

*science* and *religion*, two discrete entities. Of course, this problem is implicit in the name of the academic field: “science and religion”, or “religion and science”. Merely to air the name is to suggest that its central problem is that of relating two distinct categories, even before the second problem of conflict rears its head. Another way of saying this is that, even though most scholars in the field are bridge-builders by disposition, and dislike the hegemony of the conflict myth, merely by suggesting that a bridge needs to be built we are admitting that there is a river to be crossed. The fundamental problem of science and religion is not the conflict myth then, and neither is it the question of whether the conflict should be seen in knowledge or moral terms, but it is the prior suggestion that there are two distinct entities that need to be related. I will expand upon this point in the next section.

To summarise what I have discussed in this section: I suggest that Evans’ binary of elites/public is insufficiently subtle as it stands, especially in the way it acts to suggest that the elites propagate systemic knowledge conflict between science and religion against the moral conflict perceived by the public. I suggest that elites in the science-and-religion field are generally concerned *not* to propagate conflict (whether in knowledge or moral terms), although they inevitably do so in a tacit way because of the nature of the field and its place in secular society. They may fight against the notion of conflict, but it is an uphill battle, because conflict is embedded so deeply in our understanding of secular society and therefore in the public understanding of “science and religion” in the first place. Evans is surely right to show us that this conflict rears its head publicly and primarily in moral debates between science and religion, but I would like to defend the elites as themselves concerned to downplay conflict, and to investigate the very shapes of science and religion as repositories of knowledge (if not ethics and praxis), reflecting my fifth nuance above. It is this which I will go on to discuss in the next section.

## **The two pyramids**

One of the main ways in which Evans maintains the distinctiveness of science and religion from each other – a distinctiveness with which I feel uneasy, as I have said above – is by setting them up in terms of two “hypothetical knowledge systems”. Evans (2018, 7-9) does this graphically by means of two pyramids, one which represents the way that science works, and the other the way that religious belief works. At the apex of each pyramid there is a fundamental and abstract justificatory principle with which all lower-level propositions in the system must be consistent, all the way down to the most concrete claims made in each system. For the science pyramid, Evans suggests that the abstract justificatory principle at the apex could be something like, “Facts Derived Through Observation and Reason”, while for religion it could be, “God Can Control Nature”. These two pyramids are crucial to Evans’ elites/public binary. As Evans says:

Critically, academics and other elites generally hold to these knowledge systems of deductive belief for the issues that they focus upon. Moreover, I would describe the tasks of philosophy, theology, and science as making the vertical and horizontal links in pyramids as logically coherent as possible...Academics and other elites reason in this way because they exist in institutions that reward them for it...[C]ritically, members of the public are generally not rewarded for formulating logical structures that reach quite as high or have the same degree of coherence (Evans 2018, 8-9).

Thus, while the elites reason by means of the full vertical and horizontal extents of the pyramids, the public does not, since its members do not have the leisure or the interest to develop fully-logical hierarchical systems, and so they tend to assume that conflict occurs between the lower-level propositional statements and morality. As Evans (2018, 10) says, “people do not have the time, motivation, or desire to make their beliefs logically coherent in the way this model demands.” Elites, on the other hand, who do have the time and motivation – and are rewarded for it, Evans suggests – construe the science-and-religion debate in terms of two complete knowledge systems (two whole pyramids) which are logically incompatible on account of their distinct abstract justificatory principles. This is why, Evans believes, elites tend to see the science-and-religion debate in systemic terms regarding conflict over whole systems of knowledge claims, while the public sees it in lower-level terms, regarding specific propositions and specific moral issues.

The two-pyramids metaphor is helpful in illustrating Evans’ point, but like the elites/public binary, I worry that it simplifies the issues too far, and goes too far in making science and religion out to be two distinct entities, like chalk and cheese. Of course, I am aware that many elites in the science-and-religion field counteract the conflict myth by attempting to make science look a lot like religion, and vice versa. This can be taken too far, but by the same token it can be taken too far in the other direction, and I worry that Evans’ two pyramids does just that. In teaching the science-and-religion field I have slowly become convinced that the most practical and meaningful way to approach the debate is to granularise it by asking “Which science? Which religion?” (or better still, “Which scientific question? Which religious belief?”).



Let me put this another way by looking at the pyramids. One of my questions about the pyramid metaphor/model concerns the difficulty of agreeing upon the apex-level statement from which all lower propositions in the pyramid flow. Deciding upon such a statement is by no means a trivial exercise in most fields of enquiry. If I have understood the pyramid metaphor correctly, the science pyramid presupposes that there is one “scientific method” at the apex which all of the empirical sciences at lower levels share, and which informs all of their lower-level results and propositions, or perhaps a shared commitment to “methodological naturalism”, as though that meant the same thing for all empirical sciences. Of course, all of these sciences share Evans’ commitment to “observation and reason” at the apex, but then so do most academic subjects, even those in the arts and humanities such as history (and, arguably, also theology and religion, depending upon how we construe “observation”). This is an infamous problem in philosophy of science, that of defining a *meaningful* “scientific method” which unites all of the empirical sciences and distinguishes them from other rigorous academic subjects, and so far an answer has proved elusive. My own research area, condensed-matter physics, is clearly a branch of physics, and therefore a “natural science”, but its day-to-day aims and objectives are sufficiently far removed from other branches of physics like theoretical cosmology that it is difficult to demonstrate the common ground beyond general hand-waving aspirations like “observation and reason” about physical matter which, in any case, tell us little about what makes physics work as an intellectual system, and what joins up all of its branches. If it is difficult enough to see what would need to be at the apex to join up all of the branches of physics meaningfully, it is still more difficult to incorporate other sciences into the pyramid, like biology and earth science. This is the great problem which stands behind the “Myth of the Unity of Science” (Dupré 2004, 39-51), a tortuous issue in philosophy of science rather like that of determining a single “scientific method” which works for all beyond vague invocations of “observation and

reason”. Hence, as an elite in physics it is not clear to me that the empirical sciences can be meaningfully modelled by a single pyramid. Better perhaps, to have many pyramids, representing many distinct research areas in the sciences. And turning to the religion pyramid, I have further questions. I am unable to see why it requires a training in academic theology to realise that the lower-level concrete claims and propositions flow from the highest-level justificatory belief of a God who is in control of the universe. Indeed, this very same high-level belief has been cited to me many times by audiences when I have given popular-level talks about academic perspectives on the theology of miracles, my main research area in theology. My experience of the religious public – or at least those who attend talks on science and religion – teaches me that this kind of logical-hierarchical thinking is entirely familiar to them. Hence, I am unsure why Evans suggests that only academics think in these terms.

Overall then, I am not altogether convinced by the the pyramid metaphor, at least for the sciences, since it does not appear to reflect the messy reality of the empirical sciences as they are done on the ground. One of my main niggles here is that I am simply unsure that any of the natural sciences – and still less the supposed “edifice” of science as a whole – can be described *accurately* as a logical-deductive system of belief. Religion, on the other hand, seems to be more amenable to such a treatment, and I am happy to concede that the pyramid metaphor is more successful for a religious system like Christianity, especially since it is based on certain “knowledge” claims from which flow its ethical teachings.

And this is why I question Evans’ belief that there is a clear distinction between the way that elites access the religion pyramid compared to the religious public. Evans cites Robert Wuthnow here, as arguing that religious people (i.e. the public) “do not use high-level

concepts to justify lower-level beliefs” (Evans 2018, 98), since they are more likely to use parables, narratives and personal stories to inform their ethical thinking. I am not qualified myself to speak of religions beyond Christianity (and even then only in its Episcopalian/Anglican/Catholic guises), and I am unsure of what empirical research stands behind Wuthnow’s claim, but my personal experience of Christians leads me to question whether his sweeping assertion captures the whole truth. This is because Wuthnow’s claim appears (to me) to underestimate the all-pervasive importance of the incarnation of Christ for Christians at personal, existential and experiential levels. In brief, the person of Jesus provides the source of the highest-level deductive principles to the lowest-level propositions, parables, stories, maxims, and motivations for individual morality. For instance, a Christian is quite likely to see her religion as a deductive system beginning with the justificatory claim at the apex that Jesus is the Son of God, consistent with the slightly lower-level narrational statements from the church’s creeds and Bible (and still concerning knowledge) that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, lived and taught on earth before dying, rising again, and being taken up to heaven. And this is exactly why such a Christian would feel that she should respect Jesus’ teachings (many of which are couched in parables and open-ended stories), to the extent that she should (now at the bottom of the pyramid) apply them to her life where possible. For a Christian, the person of Jesus is ubiquitous: he appears at every level of the pyramid because of his incarnation (the apex-level statement). This is why I can see the religious public thinking in this deductive way as much as academic theologians, not least because I have heard such deductive systems laid out in many churches in many sermons (admittedly delivered by elites), and have heard ordinary Christians repeat the same systematic thinking in discussion about their personal faith. I realise that Evans is summarising a great body of Wuthnow’s work here, and I realise that I am perhaps confirming his point that elites like me do not understand the public, but his claim that only

academics in the science-and-religion field think in a deductively-logical way about religion while the religious public does not is so important to Evans' thesis that I suggest it needs further clarification. Christianity comes with a built-in deductive system which (I think) all believers would acknowledge in their own way, on account of the special theological role of the incarnation in Christianity, in fusing metaphysics, epistemology, narrative history and ethics into one flowing movement. (Evans is surely right, though, to explain that the task of theology and philosophy is to make the links in the pyramid as logically coherently as possible, and this would certainly be true of systematic theology *par excellence*; 2018, 8).

But despite my misgivings about the pyramid metaphor, I feel that Evans has introduced a helpful way of discussing the issues here, which will surely be fruitful as we continue to debate the role of science and religion as an academic field, and its impact on public thinking and acting.

### **Science and religion as natural theology**

Where I think that the pyramid model is particularly insightful comes in Evans' treatment of how the theologically-minded elites in the science-and-religion field – the “theological science-religion synthesizers”, as he calls us (2018, 27) – think. For here, Evans (2018, 28) explains that these particular elites, “assume that the relationship between religion and science concerns systemic knowledge, and therefore any conflict is due to the failure to synthesize the fact claims of religion and science into one hierarchically structured logically coherent pyramid.” I am with Evans all the way here, especially since his pyramid metaphor offers such a useful way of picturing what is going on. I, and many of my fellow theological

synthesisers (at least in Christianity), do not think of science and religion as two discrete knowledge systems, and certainly not as two discrete pyramids based on mutually-exclusive deductive principles, but as one pyramid where the apex is a statement like “Jesus is the Son of God”, and which incorporates the empirical sciences lower down, together with other human sources of knowledge and practice. Whether science itself can be envisaged as one pyramid or many is less important to me than the fact that Christian belief *can* be envisaged as one universal and all-encompassing pyramid, where the sciences are inserted at various points lower down to form some (but by no means all) of the vertical and horizontal links. Just to give one example, take the Thomistic scheme of causation, where God as Creator is the primary cause behind every natural (secondary) cause in the world. This provides a theological way of explaining how the success of the natural sciences in determining laws of nature flows from a higher-level justificatory principle where the divine lawgiver, God, is the primary cause of nature and all of its effects. Not only does such a scheme provide a way of fashioning the Christian pyramid around all of the empirical sciences, and joining up its causative links, but it also provides explanatory justification for a great metaphysical mystery which the sciences themselves cannot answer, namely why the sciences are so successful in explaining the world.

For this reason, at least some of us in the science-and-religion world steer away from the language of “synthesising” and “harmonising” which Evans uses of us. As I have said earlier, this smacks to me of two monolithic entities, “science” and “religion”, being brought together. Many of us simply do not see things in this binary way, since it does not appear to us that we are dealing with anything like C. P. Snow’s “two cultures”, so much as one culture. But in attempting to define this one culture, we also realise that we are doing nothing new. The tradition of natural theology in the centuries before Darwin, which is so often

caricatured today as a collection of outmoded “arguments from design”, was not only a rich source of inspiration for many early modern scientists, but also a way of providing metaphysical/theological justification for their scientific work, since there was often no easy distinction between “science” and “religion”. In many ways, the theologically-flavoured work which goes on in today’s science-and-religion world is the contemporary successor to that tradition of natural theology (although the term itself has largely fallen out of use).

Much more could be said here, since this is the starting point for contemporary work which is developing theologies of nature, theologies of science, and “science-engaged theology”.

Suffice it to say that practitioners here are unlikely to see science and religion in terms of monolithic entities, or distinct logical systems, and still less as systems in logical conflict.

These practitioners are, though – and here Evans is certainly right – likely to be focussed on knowledge claims, but I suggest that this is at least as much because of the special role of the incarnation in Christianity as it is because of neglect by the academics in the moral questions of the public. These academics, I suggest, are most interested in taking the ancient tradition of natural theology, and making it work for today. They are academics being academics, in other words, advancing human frontiers by revisiting, recasting and revising the knowledge of the past.

## **Conclusions**

John H. Evans has written an important book for academics working in science and religion; something of a wake-up call. His book demonstrates lucidly the enormous mismatch between the academic and public perceptions of the science-and-religion debate. If many of us in the

field have wondered in the past why its ethical dimensions have been so poorly explored, Evans' book provides us with an explanation for that deficit and a challenge for us to make good. I have suggested some ways in which Evans' character portrayal of the elites misses the mark, not so much to blunt the edge of his criticism, as to suggest ways in which it may be made more incisive. A challenge of this order needs to find its mark, and I suggest that this book would find its mark more readily if the academic field was defined more clearly.

Hence, in the interests of clarity, I should summarise what I have said. First, I have questioned whether the elites/public binary does the work that Evans needs it to do. My own perception of the elites is that they are concerned to qualify the hackneyed-conflict myth as much as he is. Evans is surely right though, that in failing to engage with the public's perception of moral conflict between science and religion the elites are failing in their remit to engage with the needs of wider culture (at least in the American context which is under the microscope here). Second, I have argued that the notion of "conflict" is considerably more nuanced than Evans' thesis suggests, as is the very idea of "science and religion" in the first place. There is much here that would benefit from further research, especially the ways that the academic science-and-religion field is entangled with secularisation thought, which surely indicates the massive importance of further sociological work like that which Evans has given us. Third, I have questioned Evans' construal of the academic perception of science and religion as distinct knowledge systems. My feeling is that, like the elites/public binary, the two-pyramids binary also does not do the work that Evans needs it to do. I argued that knowledge claims are rather more fundamental to both the public and academic perceptions of religion than he suggests, at least in Christianity, and that this is why many academics in the science-and-religion world continue to focus them. Insofar as the science-and-religion field is the branch of the academic subject of theology which grapples at first hand with

modernity and secularism, it is natural that it should engage with knowledge claims first and foremost. It is not that the theological elites are disinterested in the public's focus on morals, more that their focus as academics is on fundamentals: the principles before the practice, in effect. Still, this is no excuse for the field to continue to fail so comprehensively to engage with issues of practice (which are also, of course, of academic interest, especially to ethicists), and we have Evans to thank for drawing this to our attention.

It has been a great privilege to grapple with John's book, and I am grateful to both the editorial team of *Zygon*, and to John himself for this opportunity to think outside of my habitual box(es) in physics and theology. I know that I have posed many questions to John, many of which are no doubt naïve from a sociological perspective, and I look forward to learning further from his responses.

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<sup>i</sup> The quotation derives from a TV interview with the Conservative politician and leading voice of Brexit, Michael Gove (broadcast on *Sky News on* 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2016). Here is the full sentence of what Gove said: “I think that the people of this country have had enough of experts from organisations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong, because these people are the same ones who got consistently wrong...” Gove is cut off at this point by the interviewer  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGgiGtJk7MA> – last accessed 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019).